

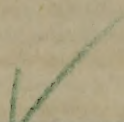


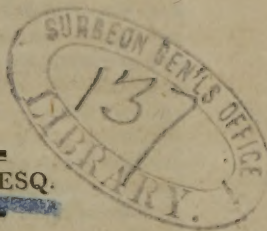
REINSTATED NLM





A  
LETTER  
TO  
*Dr. David Ramsay,*  
OF  
CHARLESTON, (S. C.)  
RESPECTING THE  
ERRORS  
IN  
JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY,  
AND OTHER LEXICONS.

  
BY NOAH WEBSTER, ESQ.



---

NEW-HAVEN :  
PRINTED BY OLIVER STEELE & CO.

1807.

LETTER

TO

Dr. David Ramsay,

OF

CHARLESTON, (S. C.)

RESPECTING THE

ERRORS

IN

JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY

AND OTHER ERRORS.

BY N. H. KELLEY, ESQ.

PRINTED BY OLIVER STEELE & CO.

1807.



## A LETTER

TO

DR. DAVID RAMSAY.

SIR,

I RECEIVED, a few days past, your favor of June 20th, in which you inform me that the "prejudices against any American attempts to improve Dr. Johnson, are very strong in that city." This intelligence is not wholly unexpected; for similar prejudices have been manifested in some parts of the northern states. A man who has read with slight attention the history of nations, in their advances from barbarism to civilization and science, cannot be surprised at the strength of prejudices long established, and never disturbed. Few centuries have elapsed, since many men lost their lives or their liberty, by publishing NEW TRUTHS; and not two centuries have past, since Galileo was imprisoned by an ecclesiastical court, for defending the truth of the Copernican System, condemned to do penance for three years, and his book burnt at Rome, as containing dangerous and damnable heresies. This example is cited as one of a multitude which the history of man presents to our view; and if it differs in *degree*, it accords in *principle*, with the case now before the American public.

400076

REINSTATED NLM

WITHDRAWN FOR EXCHANGE

N.L.M.

Philology, as it respects the origin and history of words, and the principles of construction in sentences, is, at this moment, in a condition somewhat similar to that of astronomy under the system of Tycho Brahe, with the solar system revolving round this terrestrial ball. And if gentlemen, who never suspected the weakness of the principles which they have been taught in their schools, should be alarmed at the suggestion, and utter a few anathemas against the discoverers, it should be remembered that evidence will gradually undermine their prejudices, and demolish the whole system of error. Imprisonment and death are no longer the penalties inflicted on the publishers of truth; and the man who is deterred by opposition and calumny, from attacking what he knows to be fundamentally wrong, is no soldier in the field of literary combat.

I know your love of letters, and your disposition to give a patient and candid attention to discussions and details of facts which may elucidate any interesting branch of literature. I have therefore taken the liberty to address to you a few remarks and statements, intended as a brief sketch only of the errors and imperfections in Johnson's Dictionary, and the Lexicons of other languages, now used as classical books in our seminaries of learning. These remarks I shall transmit to you through the medium of the press.

It is well known that Johnson's Dictionary has been, for half a century, a standard authority in the English Language, from which all later compilers have drawn their materials. That his work is, in some respects, erroneous and defective, has long been known in Great-Britain, and Mason has lately ventured to attempt, and with some success, to supply the defects and correct the errors. Two or three other compilers in England are engaged in a like undertaking; but these gentlemen seem to be deficient in the scheme of their work.

A few years ago, Mr. Horne Tooke undertook to investigate the origin of the English particles; and in his researches, discovered that Lexicographers had never become acquainted with these classes of words, and in remarking on their errors, he takes occasion to express his



opinion of Johnson's Dictionary in the following terms.—  
 Diversions of Purley, vol. 1, p. 182. Note, Phil. Edit.

“Johnson's merit ought not to be denied to him; but his Dictionary is the most imperfect and faulty, and the least valuable of any of his productions; and that share of merit which it possesses, makes it by so much the more hurtful. I rejoice, however, that though the least valuable, he found it the most profitable; for I could never read his preface without shedding a tear. And yet it must be confessed, that his Grammar and History, and Dictionary of what *he calls* the English Language, are, in all respects (except the bulk of the latter) most truly contemptible performances; and a reproach to the learning and industry of a nation which could receive them with the slightest approbation. Nearly *one third* of this Dictionary is as much the language of the Hottentots as of the English; and it would be no difficult matter so to translate one of the plainest and most popular numbers of the Spectator into the language of that dictionary, that no mere Englishman, though well read in his own language, would be able to comprehend one sentence of it.

“It appears to be a work of labor, and yet is in truth one of the most idle performances ever offered to the public; compiled by an author who possessed not one single requisite for the undertaking, and (being a publication of a set of booksellers) owing its success to that very circumstance which makes it impossible that it should deserve success.”

These animadversions, which are directly opposed to popular opinion, coming from a man who had penetrated deeply into the history of our language, are calculated to excite curiosity, and deserve a careful examination.

Extravagant praise of any human production, like indiscriminate censure, is seldom well founded; and both are evidences of want of candor or want of discernment. On a careful examination of the merits of Johnson's Dictionary, it will unquestionably appear that the blind admiration which would impose it upon the world as a very accurate and indisputable authority, errs as much upon one extreme, as the pointed condemnation of the whole work, does upon

the other. But it is the fate of man to vibrate from one extreme to another. The great intellectual powers of Dr. Johnson, displayed in many of his works, but especially in his *Rambler* and his *Rasselas*, have raised his reputation to high distinction, and impressed upon all his opinions a stamp of *authority*, which gives them currency among men, without an examination into their intrinsic value. The character of correctness which he merited and obtained from his ethical writings, on subjects of which all men can judge, has been very naturally transferred to his philological works, on which few men are competent to decide.— Yet nothing is more natural than that his writings on men and manners should be correct, as their correctness must depend chiefly on observation and on reading that requires little labor; while his Dictionary, the accuracy of which must depend on minute distinctions or laborious researches into unentertaining books, may be left extremely imperfect and full of error.

These circumstances however are seldom considered; and Johnson's writings had, in Philology, the effect which Newton's discoveries had in Mathematics, to interrupt for a time the progress of this branch of learning; for when any man has pushed his researches so far beyond his contemporaries, that all men despair of proceeding beyond him, they will naturally consider his principles and decisions as the limit of perfection on that particular subject, and repose their opinions upon his authority, without examining into their validity....“*Ubi aut præteriri aut æquari eos posse desperavimus, studium cum spe senescit.*” Vell. Paterculus. lib. 1. 17.

In the preface to Johnson's Dictionary, we have a splendid specimen of elevated composition, not indeed perfectly free from faults, but generally correct in diction as well as in principle.

In the history of the English Language, the author has proved himself very imperfectly acquainted with the subject. He commences with a most egregious error, in supposing the Saxon language to have been introduced into Britain in the fifth century, after the Romans had abandoned the island; whereas, nothing is better attested in history

than that the branch of the Teutonic, which constitutes the basis of our present language, was introduced by the Belgic tribes, which occupied all the southern part of the island at the time, and evidently long before Cesar invaded the country. Equally erroneous is his assertion that the Saxons and Welsh were nations totally distinct. The number of words of Celtic original plainly discoverable in the English language, is much greater than Johnson supposed; and the affinity of those nations is more fully manifested by numerous Celtic words found in the German, Swedish and other Teutonic dialects. But there is demonstration of that affinity in two facts, which seem to have escaped observation—first, the use of the same *relative pronoun* by the Irish and Scotch of Celtic origin, as well as by the Greeks, Romans and every Teutonic nation—and second, by the construction of some of the cases of nouns.

This part of Johnson's work, as well as his Grammar, which is chiefly extracted from Wallis' Grammar, if they are not "contemptible performances," to use Tooke's language, are wretchedly imperfect. They abound with errors; but the principal fault is, that they contain very few of the material and important facts which would serve to illustrate the history of the language, and of the several nations from which it is derived. This field of inquiry has never been fully explored; it is a fruitful field, and hereafter the cultivation of it is to produce a valuable harvest of historical information.

In a brief survey of the work under consideration, a few general faults in the execution of it will be named.

1. *The insertion of a multitude of words that do not belong to the language.* These words Johnson informs us, are inserted on the authority of Bailey, Ainsworth and Phillips—but they are confessedly terms which have never been used in oral or written English. *Language* consists of words uttered by the *tongue*; or written in books for the purpose of being read. Terms which are not authorised by either of these modes of communicating ideas, are no part of a language, and have no claim to a place in a dictionary.—Such are the following—*Adversable, advesperate, adjudgate, agriculation, abstrude, injudicable, spicosity, crapulence, mori-*



*gerous, tenebrosity, balbucinate, illachrymable, &c.* The number of this class of words is not known ; but it probably rises to two thousand or more. Some of them are omitted by Sheridan, Walker, Jones, Perry, Entick, Hamilton, &c. but most of them are retained in all the English Dictionaries, and Ash has been careful to preserve them all. These words seem to have been anglicized from the Latin language, and inserted by the first compilers of English Dictionaries, in their vocabularies, as candidates for employment ; but having never been called into service, they stand like impertinent intruders into good company ; a sort of unwelcome guests, who are treated with coldness and neglect. They no more belong to the English language than the same number of Patagonian words ; and the insertion and retention of them in English dictionaries is a violation of all the rules of lexicography. Had a native of the United States taken a *fiftieth* part of the same liberty, in a similar production, the admirers of Johnson, and other English writers, would have branded him with the most pointed opprobrium.

2. Another class of material errors in the great work of Dr. Johnson, proceed from an injudicious selection of authorities. Among the authors cited in support of his definitions, there are indeed the names of Tillotson, Newton, Locke, Milton, Dryden, Addison, Swift and Pope ; but no small portion of words in his vocabulary, are selected from writers of the 17th century, who, though well versed in the learned languages, had neither taste nor a correct knowledge of English. Of these writers, Sir Thomas Brown seems to have been a favorite ; yet the style of Sir Thomas is not English ; and it is astonishing that a man attempting to give the world a standard of the English Language should have ever mentioned his name, but with a reprobation of his style and use of words. The affectation of Latinity was indeed a common vice of authors from the revival of letters to the age of Queen Ann ; but Brown in attempting to write Latin-English, exceeded all his contemporaries, and actually rendered himself unintelligible. The following examples will afford a specimen of his pedantry and ill taste :—

"The effects of their activity are not precipitously *abrupted*, but gradually proceed to their cessations."

"Authors are also suspicious, nor greedily to be swallowed, who write of secrets, to deliver antipathies, sympathies, and the occult *abstrusities* of things."

"The intire or broken *compagination* of the magnetical fabric."

"Some have written rhetorically and *concessively*, not controverting, but assuming the question, which, taken as granted, advantaged the illation."

"Its fluctuations are but motions subservient, which winds, shelves, and every interjacency *irregulates*."

"Separated by the voice of God, things in their species came out in uncommunicated varieties and *irrelative* seminalities."

See Johnson's Dictionary, under the words in Italics.

There are probably thousands of similar passages in Johnson's Dictionary, cited as authorities for the use of words which no other English writer and no English speaker ever used; words which, as Horne Tooke says, are no more English than the language of the Hottentots. Were the only evil of introducing such authorities, to swell the size of the book with nonsense, we might consent to overlook the injury; but Johnson has suffered thousands of these terms to pass as *authorized English words*, by which means the student is apt to be misled, especially before his taste is formed by extensive reading. Indeed some writers of age and judgement are led by Johnson's authority to the use of words which are not English, and which give their style an air of pedantry and obscurity; and not unfrequently, to the use of words which do not belong to the language. Thus in a letter of ———, published not long ago, respecting Burr's conspiracy, the writer spoke of matters of *dubiosity*—doubtless upon the authority of English Dictionaries, transcribed from Johnson's, who cites Sir Thomas Brown for the use of this barbarous word. So from an illegitimate word used by Thompson, *infracted*, Johnson took the liberty to form the verb *infract*, which has been frequently used for the true word *infringe*, and doubtless upon his sole authority. From a careful examination of this work, and its effect upon the language, I am inclined to believe that Johnson's authority has multiplied instead of reducing the number of corruptions in the



English language. Let any man of correct taste cast his eye on such words as denominable, opiniatry, ariolation, assation, ataraxy, clancular, comminuable, conclusible, dedentition, deuterostopy, digladiation, dignotion, cubiculary, discubitory, exolution, exenterate, impossible, impossibility, indigitate, &c. and let him say whether a dictionary which gives *thousands* of such terms, as *authorized English words*, is a safe standard of writing. From a general view of the work, I am confident the number of words inserted which are not authorized by any English writer, and those which are found only in a single pedantic author, like Brown, and which are really no part of the language, amount to four or five thousand; *at least a tenth part of the whole number.*

The evils resulting from this injudicious selection of words are not limited to the sphere of Johnson's work; had this been the case, the increased bulk of the book, by the insertion of useless words, would, in a degree, have been a remedy for the evils, by circumscribing its sale and use. But most of these words are transcribed into all the later compilations—Ash, Walker, Sheridan, &c. and even the pocket Dictionaries are swelled in size by a multitude of unused and barbarous words. Nor does the evil rest here; some terms are copied into the dictionaries of foreign languages; and a German or a Spaniard who is learning English, must suppose all these terms to be really a part of our language: he will of course learn them as such, and introduce them into his discourse and writings, until corrected by a familiar acquaintance with the language now spoken. Johnson's Dictionary therefore furnishes no standard of correct English: but in its present form, tends very much to corrupt and pervert the language.\*

---

\* In the English-Dutch Dictionary of Willcocke, we find the compiler has translated ariolation, clancular, denominable, comminuable, &c. into Dutch. In Bailey's Fahrenkruger, we see digladiation, dignotion, exenterate, &c. turned into German. These, or similar words, are by Neuman translated into Spanish—and where the mischief ends, it is impossible to ascertain. And what must foreigners think of English taste and erudition, when they are told that their Dictionaries contain thousands of such words which are not used by the English nation?

3. It is questionable how far vulgar and cant words are to be admitted into a Dictionary; but one thing must be acknowledged by any man who will inspect the several dictionaries in the English language, that if any portion of such words are inadmissible, Johnson has transgressed the rules of lexicography beyond any other compiler; for his work contains more of the lowest of all vulgar words, than any other now extant, Ash excepted. It may be alleged that it is the duty of a lexicographer to insert and define all words found in English books: then such words as *fishify*, *jackalent*, *parma-citty*, *jiggumbob*, *conjobble*, *foutra*, &c. are legitimate English words! Alas, had a native of the United States introduced such vulgar words and offensive ribaldry into a similar work, what columns of abuse would have issued from the Johnsonian presses, against the wretch who could thus sully his book and corrupt the language. But Shakespeare and Butler used such words in their writings!!! Yes, vulgar manners and characters must be represented by vulgar language; the writer of plays must accommodate his language to his audience; the rabble in the galleries are entitled to their share of amusement; and a part of every play must be composed of obscenity and vulgar ribaldry. In this manner, the lowest language and the coarsest manners are exhibited before a promiscuous audience, and derive some importance from the reputation of the writer and of the actors. From plays they pass into other books—yes, into standard authorities; and national language, as well as morals, are corrupted and debased by the influence of the stage!

4. It has been generally believed that a prime excellence of Johnson's Dictionary is, the accuracy with which the different senses of words are distinguished; and uncommon praises have been bestowed upon the author's power of discrimination. On a critical attention however to his definitions, it will appear that a *want of just discrimination*, is one of the principal defects of his works; and that to this defect, we may ascribe innumerable errors, and no small part of the superfluous bulk of the Dictionary. Let the reader attend to the following examples.

“Larceny.” “Petty Theft.” Exemplification. “Those laws would be very unjust, that should chastize murder and *petty larceny* with the same punishment.”  
Spectator.

This is all that Johnson has given us for definition and illustration of the word *larceny*; and every lawyer must observe that the definition is incorrect. *Larceny* comprehends every species of *theft*; not only grand and petty larceny, but burglary and robbery; tho the latter are usually arranged as separate crimes.—The author seems not to have understood the word; his definition is taken from the passage in the *Spectator*; and the word *petty*, in that passage, which should form no part of the definition, is prefixed to *larceny*. This is a very common fault with our author; not understanding the term, or *not discriminating* between the true sense of the term by itself, and its sense in *connection*, he often takes a part of the passage selected for illustration, and incorporates it into the definition. Thousands of examples of this negligence are to be found in his Dictionary.—See a similar error under the word *obelisk*, which, in its character as a reference, the author defines to be a “mark of *censure* in the margin of a book”—evidently because, Grew, in the passage cited for illustration, used it in that sense. But certainly an obelisk is as often used, as a reference to things indifferent or worthy of *praise*, as to things worthy of *censure*. Let the following definitions be noted :

“ *Industrious*.

1. Diligent, laborious, assiduous, opposed to *slothful*.

“ Frugal and *industrious* men are commonly friendly to the established government. *Temple*.

2. Laborious to a particular end; opposite to *remiss*.

He himself being excellently learned, and *industrious* to seek out the truth of all things concerning the original of his own people, hath set down the testimony of the ancients truly. *Spencer*.

Let our just censures  
Attend the true event, and put we on  
*Industrious* soldiership.

*Shakspeare*.

His thoughts were low :  
To vice *industrious*; but to nobler deeds,  
Timorous and slothful.

*Milton*.

3. Designed; done for the purpose.

The *industrious* perforation of the tendons of the second joints of fingers and toes, draw the tendons of the third joints through. *Morc*.

“Observe carefully all the events which happen either by an occasional occurrence of various causes, or by the *industrious* application of knowing men.” Watts.

It may be questioned whether the second definition of *industrious*, above recited, is necessary, as distinct from the first. What difference is there in the sense of the word, whether it marks a habit of application to *one* object or to *twenty*? If any distinction should be thought necessary, it should rather be noted under the first head in the following manner:—“Diligent, laborious, assiduous; denoting a habit of diligent application to business in general, or to a particular object.”—This however is not very material.

But in the third definition, the author has evidently mistaken the use of the term. The “*industrious* perforation of tendons,” does not signify an *industry*, designed or for a particular purpose, any more than in every other case. The word *industrious* is used to denote a perforation *made with industry*, that is, with diligence and care—the epithet being applied to the *effect* instead of the cause.\* So also the *industrious* application of knowing men, in the passage from Watts, means *their* application bestowed with *diligence*. The industry of men is always directed to some object, and generally to one object at a time; but this particular or general application requires no distinction of definition. Indeed, upon this system of explanation, the application of a word to any and every purpose would require a separate definition. Probably one fourth of Johnson’s definitions are of this kind—serving not only to swell the size of the book, without use, but rather to embarrass and mislead the student, than to enlighten him.

*Notarial*, Johnson defines, “taken by a notary”—and for illustration, gives this passage from Ayliffe. “It may be called an authentic writing, tho’ not a public instrument,

---

\* This use of attributes is legitimate, to a certain extent; but it requires correct taste and an acquaintance with good usage, to mark the limits beyond which the use of such words is forced and improper. Thus “criminal law,” “numb palsy,” “putrid fever,” are well established phrases; but Dr. Bedoes, in the use of “scrophulous remedies,” “insane paroxysm,” and “incurable establishment,” has transgressed all the bounds of propriety. See his *Hygeia*. Ess. 6th. 41, 42.—10th. 22, 55.



through want of *notarial evidence*." Here the Lexicographer has given a definition from example—*evidence* taken by a notary ; but let the definition be extended to other legitimate and common expressions :—"notarial seal," "notarial business," "notarial character"—then we have a seal *taken by a notary*, &c.—and what sort of language is this ?

*Peculation*, says Johnson, is "robbery of the public—theft of the public money." According to this definition, a person who breaks into an edifice and steals money from a public treasury, is a peculator—which every man of common education knows is not true, as the word is understood by the English and their descendants in this country.

*Earn*, says Johnson, is "to *gain* as the reward or wages of labor, or any performance." But this is not correct; for many a man *earns* money, who never *gains* it. To *earn*, is to *merit* by an *equivalent in service*, not by an *equivalent in money*.

*Ford*, says Johnson, is "to pass without swimming."—He ought at least to have said, to pass *water* or a *stream*. Now according to this definition, a man that passes over a stream on a bridge, or a bird that flies over it, *fords* the stream ; for both pass it *without swimming*.

*Mutiny*, says our author, is "insurrection, sedition"—but it is neither one nor the other, except among *soldiers* and *mariners*.

Johnson's Dictionary abounds with similar inaccuracies, which prove the author's *want of discrimination*, or most unpardonable *negligence*.

5. Equally manifest is Johnson's *want of discrimination* in defining words nearly synonymous ; or rather words which bear some portion of a common signification.

"*Fraud*," says the author, is "Deceit ; cheat ; trick ; artifice ; subtilty ; stratagem." But a man may use *tricks*, *artifice*, *subtilty* and *stratagems*, in a thousand ways without *fraud* ; and he may be *deceived*, without being *defrauded*. Johnson has defined the word in the loose sense which *fraus* had in Latin, without discriminating between that, and the strict technical sense which is most frequent in our language.



"Impracticable," the author defines by "not to be performed, unfeasible, impossible;" and "impracticableness" by "impossibility." *Impossible* implies an absurdity, contradiction, or utter want of power to be, or to be done, in the abstract; but *impracticable* signifies only, not to be done by human means, or by the means proposed.

*Ask*, is defined by *petition* and *beg*—*demand* and *claim*; but *beg* implies much more earnestness than *ask*; while *demand* and *claim* have a different import; both conveying the idea of *right* in the person asking, and *obligation* or supposed obligation in the person requested. Johnson explains the word, when used for setting a price on goods, by *demand* and *claim*. But this is an error; a man cannot *demand* a price for his commodity; for altho he has a *right* to set his price, no man is under any *obligation* to buy. So also *assent* and *consent* are defined by each other; and some writers have actually confounded the terms. But *assent* is merely an agreement of the mind to things not affecting rights; as one assents to an abstract proposition; but *consent* carries with it an agreement to some proposal that affects one's rights; as *consent* to sell, to exchange, &c.

The pernicious effects of the common negligence of men of letters in making themselves accurately acquainted with the *import* of words, are visible in our best authors; and for want of nicely discriminating the various senses of words somewhat allied, our Dictionaries want half the value which ought to be possessed by such publications. Of numerous examples which I have noted to verify this remark, take the following instances:

"We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, *obstructed* by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure." *Rambler*, No. 50.

Here Johnson has used *obstructed* for *deterred*; for danger operates on the mind by *moral influence*; not by *physical power*.

"This lake (Mæris,) is entirely the *produce* of human industry." *Beloe's Herod. Euterp.* 149.

*Produce*, in its present *acceptation*, is not used for that which is produced by mere art or labor, *without* the agency of nature. The word should have been *production*, or *work*.

"All animals drew their origin from Asia, and thence spread into other countries—with these were introduced some customs and inventions, of which the Americans were *deprived* on account of their distance, &c."

*Cullen's Clavigero. Dis. 4.*

The American savages could not be *deprived* of inventions which they never possessed—previous possession being necessarily implied in *deprived*. This use of *deprived* for *destitute* is not unfrequent. Smellie, in his Philosophy of Natural History, chap. 4. speaks of "matter as *deprived* of spontaneous motion and other qualities of animated beings." This use of the word is a gross impropriety.

"These errors, (in the Copies of Aristotle) have been *increased* by the officiousness of later transcribers"

*Enfield. Hist. Phil. b. 2. ch. 9.*

The author meant *multiplied*, instead of *increased*: *multiply* is the word to express additional numbers—*increase* expresses only an enlargement of bulk or quantity.

"I have never found it to affect the tongue with any *discernible* taste."

*Heron's Fourcroy. vol. 1. 321. Lond. 1796.*

"Tin has a very *discernible* smell.

*Ibm. 2. 445, and 472.*

*Discern* is applied to the *eye* and to the *mind*; but never to the sense of *feeling*, *taste*, or *smell*. The word is used by mistake for *perceptible*.

Nothing is more common than to use *attain* for *obtain* or *procure*. *Attain* can never be used with propriety, except when *to* naturally follows it.—"Such knowledge is high; I cannot *attain to it*." A man *attains* [*to*] a high degree of celebrity.—This is the true and only legitimate use of the word, expressing an *effort towards* the object. *To* is often omitted after the verb, and sometimes with propriety; but if *to* cannot be supplied, the word is improperly used. The best authors have erred in the use of the word. Thus the passage cited by Johnson from Swift, to illustrate his first definition, is not English. "All the nobility here could not *attain* the same savor as Wood did." It ought to be *obtain* or *procure*. Dr. Johnson himself, not discriminating between the two words, or misled by the mistakes of others, used the word in the same inaccurate manner.—*Letter to Drummond. 1766.*

And his first definition of the word, "to gain, procure, obtain"—founded on the errors of authors, has been the means of propagating this use of *attain*—a use at which the ears of a correct scholar cannot but revolt.—"After all the answers, which can be *attained*, shall be received," is the language of a learned society in our own country—and who can read it without regretting the miserable state of philological criticism?

"Receive my sincere congratulations on your present *assemblage*," said a Governor to the legislature of a certain state.

See also Life of Washington, vol. 1. 74. *Assemblage* is rarely or never used of persons; and never legitimately used for the *act of collecting* or coming together.

See Life of Washington, 4th. 13. *escorted* used for *conveyed*; and perhaps the error may be ascribed entirely to Johnson, who defines *escort* by *convoy*—not considering that *escort* is a guard by *land*, and not by water.

"Many persons having been near patients of the small pox, without *acquiring* the disease." *Darwin's Zoon. Sect. 33.*

To *acquire* a disease is most palpable nonsense.

"Principles are no other but the primordial nature of things upon which systems are *predicated*."—"Morals, *predicated* upon the connection between man and man." *Trial of Selfridge, p. 133.*

*Predicate*, a term in logic, is to affirm one thing of another; and the common misuse of the word shows the wretched state of critical knowledge in our country.

Paley, book 1. chap. 7. Mor. Philos. speaks of the "*depravity* of what man is about to do;" and book 3. chap. 5. of *evacuating* the force of promises; and this barbarous language is in a classical school book, used in our colleges. It is evidently borrowed from Bacon and South, whom Johnson has cited as authorities.

Addison uses this expression—"the *veracity* of facts;" and Bryant, the "*veracity* of the scriptures;" both of which are egregious mistakes. *Veracity* is the *disposition to speak truth*, and not *verity*, or truth itself. *Veracity*, *ex vi termini*, is predicable only of a moral agent, or intelligent being. A man of *veracity* will always speak *truth* or *verity*. This is the only legitimate use of the word.

An American Governor speaks about "*embarrassing the avenue to justice.*" Gillies, in his translation of Aristotle, says, "We must proceed cautiously from particulars to generals, that we may not be *cheated* (deceived) by words"—not considering that *cheat* refers to *property*. He tells us too of encountering disgrace without the *expectancy* of honor—using the word as synonymous with *expectation*. We every day hear, in our own country, of wrongs which excite the *sensibility* of the public; the writers mistaking *sensibility*, or the faculty of receiving impressions, for *sensation*, the effect or impressions received.

But I will not multiply examples. Let me only add, that in the course of thirty years reading, I have not found a single author who appears to have been accurately acquainted with the true import and force of terms in his own language. And a multitude of errors committed by writers, evidently from their misapprehending the import of words, are cited as authorities by Johnson, instead of being noticed with censure. Indeed, thousands of instances are to be found in modern books, of a misapplication of terms, which are clearly ascribable to the negligence and mistakes of that lexicographer.

6. Another particular which is supposed to add greatly to the value of Johnson's Dictionary, is the illustration of the various senses of words by passages from English authors of reputation. Yet, in fact, this will be found, on careful examination, one of the most exceptionable parts of his performance: For two reasons—First, that no small part of his examples are taken from authors who did not write the language with purity—and second, that a still larger portion of them throw not the least light on his definitions.

The first objection has been considered in the previous remarks, and proved by extracts from Brown's vulgar errors—a work which manifests the most intolerable pedantry, and a total want of taste. Would the limits of this sketch permit, I would give further illustrations, by extracts from Glanvil, Digby, Ayliffe, Peacham, L'Estrange and other authors, which Johnson has cited as authorities—writers who are so far from being models of classical purity, that they have been long since condemned for their

want of taste, and are now known only by name. As far as their works have any influence, it is derived from Johnson's authority, and the passages he has cited; and as far as this authority goes, it has a tendency to corrupt the style of writing. The examples I have given prove that it has had some effect; tho' fortunately not very extensive. Of the old authors cited, it is however proper to notice Shakspeare, as Johnson has quoted his works more frequently than any other, and relies much on his authority. Shakspeare was a man of little learning; and altho, when he wrote the popular language of his day, his use of words was tolerably correct, yet whenever he attempted a style beyond that, he often fell into the grossest improprieties. Thus he speaks of the *insisture* of the heavens and the planets—cords too *intrinsecate*—to *patient* a person—a *pelting* river and *pelting* farm—to *sanctuarise* murder—*sightless* stains for *offensive* stains—the *sternage* of a navy—*compunctionous* visitings of nature—a *combinate* husband—of *convertite*—*conspectuity* and *correspensive*, &c. barbarisms which every correct ear instantly condemns—and for which he certainly could plead no authority, even in the pedantic age in which he lived. Some of them perhaps may be ascribed to a license of writing which he thought justifiable—but more of them, to his want of erudition. Whatever admiration the world may bestow on the *Genius* of Shakspeare, his language is full of errors, and ought not to be offered as a model for imitation.

The other objection to Johnson's quotations, is, that a great part of them throw no light on his definitions; indeed a great part of English words require no illustration. Take the following examples:

“*Alley*—a walk in a garden.”

“And all within were walks and *alleys* wide,  
With footing worn, and leading inward far.” *Spenser.*

Where *alleys* are close gravelled, the earth putteth forth the first year knot grass and after, spire grass. *Bacon.*

“Yonder *alleys* green  
Our walk at noon, with branches overgrown.” *Milton.*

“Come my fair love, our morning's task we lose;  
Some labor, even the easiest life would choose;



Ours is not great, the dangling boughs to crop,  
Whose too luxuriant growth our *alleys* stop."

*Dryden.*

"The thriving plants, ignoble broomsticks made,  
Now sweep those *alleys* they were born to shade."

*Pope.*

Now, let me inquire, is any man, after reading all these passages, better acquainted with the meaning of *alley*? Do the passages throw the smallest light on the definition? Certainly they do not. The quotations serve no purpose but to show that Spenser, Bacon, Milton, Dryden and Pope used the word *alley* for a walk in a garden. And what then? Does any reader of English want all these authorities to show the word to be legitimate? Far from it. Nineteen twentieths of all our words are so common, that they require no proof at all of legitimacy. Yet the example here given is by no means the most exceptionable for the number of authorities cited. The author some times offers thirty or forty lines to illustrate words which every man, woman and child understands as well as Johnson. Thirty-five lines of exemplification under the word *froth*, for example, are just as useless in explaining the word, as would be the same number of lines from the language of the six nations.

"Finger," says Johnson, "is the flexible member of the hand by which men catch and hold."—Now to prove this he cites passages from six authors.

"The fingers and thumb in each hand consist of fifteen bones—there being three to each finger."

*Quincy.*

" . . . . You seem to understand me,  
By each at once her choppy finger laying  
Upon her skinny lips."

*Shakespeare.*

"Diogenes, who is never said  
For aught that ever I could read  
To whine, put *fingers* in the eye and sob,  
Because he had never another tub."

*Hudibras.*

"The hand is divided into four *fingers* bending forward, and one opposite to them bending backwards, and of greater strength than any of them singly, which we call the thumb, to join with them severally or united; whereby it is fitted to lay hold of objects of any size or quantity."

*Ray.*

"A hand of a vast extension, and a prodigious number of *fingers* playing upon all the organ pipes of the world, and making every one sound a particular note."

*Keil.*

“ Poor Peg sewed, spun, and knit for a livelihood, till her *fingers*’ ends were sore.”  
*Arbuthnot.*

Here we arrive at the end of the author’s exemplification of this sense of *finger*—and except a little anatomical knowledge from Quincy and Ray, what have we learnt from these long quotations? Why, surely nothing—except what we all knew before, that English authors have used the word *finger* just as the word is now used.

ONE HALF of the whole bulk of Johnson’s Dictionary is composed of quotations equally useless. *One half* of all the money that has been paid for the book, and which, in fifty years, must have been a very great amount, has been taken from the purchasers for what is entirely useless. Whether this mode of constructing the work was intended for the benefit of the compiler, or whether it was a speculation of the booksellers, as Mr. Tooke has suggested, is hardly worth an inquiry—but I am confident in the assertion, that the superfluous size of the work operates as one of the grossest impositions ever practiced on the public. Ainsworth’s illustrations of Latin words, which are, beyond comparison, the most judicious in plan and execution, are comprised in less than one third of the compass.

7. The last defect in Johnson’s Dictionary, which I shall notice, is the inaccuracy of the etymologies. As this has been generally considered as the least important part of a Dictionary, the subject has been little investigated, and is very imperfectly understood, even by men of science.—Johnson scarcely entered the threshold of the subject. He consulted chiefly Junius and Skinner; the latter of whom was not possessed of learning adequate to the investigation—and Junius, like Vossius, Scaliger and most other etymologists on the continent, labored to deduce all languages from the Greek. Hence these authors neglected the principal sources of information, which were to be found only in the north of Europe, and in the west of Ireland and Scotland. In another particular, they all failed of success—they never discovered some of the principal modes in which the primitive radical words were combined to form the more modern compounds. On this subject therefore almost *every thing remains to be done.*

To give very numerous examples of Johnson's errors in etymology would exceed the limits prescribed to these remarks. Two or three examples must serve as specimens of the general tenor of his work.

"School," Johnson deduces from the Latin *schola*—French *école*. He then gives for definitions—1st. A house of discipline and instruction. 2. a place of literary education ; a university. 3. a state of instruction. 4. system of doctrine as delivered by particular teachers. 5. the age of the church and form of theology succeeding that of the fathers. Here the author first mistakes the origin of the word, and omits wholly the primary sense, and that which is still its principal sense.

*School* is of Teutonic origin, *scole*, *scolu*, denoting a multitude or great number collected. We have the original sense in a *school* of fish ; which has been corrupted, by blundering writers, into *shoal* or *shole*. From this root the Romans had their *schola*, and not from the Greek *scholē*, otium, as Ainsworth supposes. Hence the first and principal sense of the word, which Johnson has overlooked, is a number of persons collected for the purpose of receiving instruction. The persons thus assembled constitute the *school*. The other senses are derivative.

*Side* Johnson deduces from *side*, Saxon—*sijde*, Dutch ; but what the word originally expressed, he does not inform us ; then beginning his definitions with "the part of animals fortified by ribs"—he proceeds through eight senses of the word, without ever glancing at the original and most important idea which it was intended to express.

*Side* is from the Saxon *sid*, broad, wide---the original idea is, that side is the broad part of a thing, opposed to the ends or narrow part. In the same manner, the Latins took their *latus*, side, from *latus*, broad. From this sense, are easily deduced all the uses of the word---tho in some instances, its uses have deviated from the primitive sense.

From not understanding the radical terms, it has happened that Johnson, like all other lexicographers, has often, not to say generally, begun his definitions at the wrong end---beginning with a remote, collateral or figurative sense, and placing the original meaning the very last in order. Ainsworth's Latin Dictionary, the best specimen

of Lexicography extant, is liable to the same objection, and from the same cause, a want of etymological knowledge.

As this subject involves so large a portion of errors, that I hardly know where to begin or what to select, from the mass of mistakes and imperfections, I shall not pursue the attempt to notice Johnson's errors; but to enable the reader more easily to comprehend the uses of a correct deduction of words from their originals, and to see the miserable state of this species of learning in Europe, as well as in this country, I will present an example of real etymology; having first stated the opinion of the standard authors.

"Censeo," says Vossius, "cum varie sumatur, et difficile dictu sit, quæ notio sit princeps, difficile est enim indicare, quam originem habeat." After stating the difficulty of arriving at the primitive idea and the origin of the word, he proceeds in his usual manner, to offer the conjectures of learned men. He mentions the Hebrew, *ks*, to *count* or *number*, as one of the words from which authors have deduced it. And Parkhurst actually deduces the word from this Hebrew root, inserting *n*, to make out the orthography. Vossius labors through half a column with his conjectures, and leaves the word where he found it. Ainsworth says nothing on the subject.

"King," says Johnson, "is a contraction of the Teutonic *cuning* or *cyning*, which signified *stout* or *valiant*." *Can*, *con* and *ken* the same author refers to the Teutonic verb, *cunnan*, to know---and there he leaves us.

But all these difficulties vanish, when we recur to the primitive Celtic, in which language *kean*, *cean*, *chean* or *ken* signified the *head*, as it still does in the Irish and Erse. The word being gutturally pronounced, modern authors write it with a different initial consonant; but this creates no difficulty.

From this term, denoting the *head* of the human body, were formed the Gothic *kunnan* and the Saxon *cunnan*---to know---this operation of the mind being supposed to be seated in the *head*. Hence our modern *con* and *ken*, both having primarily the same idea. Hence our modern *can*, which is only a dialectical variation of *con* and *ken*, and originally signified to *know*---its modern application to ex-



press physical power, rather than intellectual, is of a recent date---and the transition is easy from *know*---to, *know to do*---and thence, to *be able to do*. Hence also the Welsh *gŵn* to know and *ceinio*, to see---the old Irish *gnia*, knowledge, and a judge---the Greek *gnō*---that is, *gnōō*, for *kencō*---and hence the English *know*---that is, *kenow*---through the Saxon *cnuwan*. From the same root the Romans formed their *censeo*, [pronounced *kenseo*] to think or judge---intellectual operations. Hence the same word came to be used for taking an account of citizens by the head or poll, and hence to *rate* or *assess* them by the poll. And as the *censors*, or numberers of polls, were invested with the power of punishing citizens for immoral conduct, the word came to denote *censure*, *ensorious*. Hence also we have *census*, enumeration of polls. From this word, in the sense of head, we have *king*, or *head* of a tribe or nation, and the Asiatics, their *khan*.

It would be needless to trace the ramifications of the word, in the modern languages, as they are very obvious.

"Broad," says Johnson, Saxon. *brad*. and there he leaves the etymology. *Board*, he deduces from the Gothic *baurd*---Saxon *braed*.

This word is nearly the same in all the Teutonic dialects, and its original meaning was width, extent. Teutonic *breit*; Gothic, *braids*; Saxon, *brad*; Danish, *bred*; Belgic, *breed*. From the sense of *width* or *extent*, it came to be applied to a thin *wide* piece of wood, a board---in Saxon *bred*. British, *bwrđ*. As boards were used to eat on, hence Irish *bord*, a table---to *board*---to eat at the board or table---boarder, &c.\* From the same root, we have *bord*, in the old law books, a cottage built of boards---and *bordmen*, *bordarii*, &c. who supplied the table. From the idea of *width*, the same word came to denote *side*, *rim*, and afterwards, *edge*. Hence the French *D'abord*, at first,

---

\* "Lauti, cibum capiunt; separatæ singulis sedes, et sua cuique mensa." Tacit. *De Mor. Germ.* 22. "The Germans, after washing, take their meals---each person having a separate seat and table." It is thus that etymology and history illustrate each other. The primitive mode, in rude ages, was probably for individuals to lay their food upon a *board* on their knees. Hence a *board* was the *table*.



that is, at the side or margin---*aboard*, access---*border*, to form an edge or rim---*embroider*, and *bordure*. Hence also, to *board* a ship—to come to the side and enter---*aboard*, on the boards or planks---*overboard*, over the side ; *by the board*, by the side---*starboard*, steer board, or helm-side, &c.

“Starboard,” says Johnson, “*Steor board*, Saxon”—and there he leaves us. In this instance, as in more than half the words in the language, he might as well have said nothing on the subject, for his etymologies afford not a particle of light.

*Star*, in this word, is from the same Teutonic root as *steer*. The word has a common origin with *star*, and the Greek *astēr*—and doubtless originated in the practice of directing vessels by the *stars*, in primitive ages---to steer, is to *star*---to point a vessel to a *star*. Hence in Saxon, *steore* is the helm or director of a ship, and with a trifling difference in orthography, this word retains that sense in German, Dutch and Swedish, to this day. As the man at helm stands with the tiller at his right hand, that side of a ship was called *steor-board*, helm-side. The word is now contracted into *starboard*.

“Wave,” says Johnson, “*waege*, Saxon, *waegh*, Dutch, *vague*, French.”

“Weigh, *woegan*, Saxon, *weghen*, Dutch.” Here he leaves us, without informing us what these words mean. The origin of these and several other words is in the Teutonic *wag*, a wave, and the radical idea is that of a fluctuating motion, like that of waves---the first thing that would strike the mind of unlettered man. Hence the Saxon *wag* or *weg*, a balance for *weighing*---which rises and falls like the waves. From this idea and this word, we have *weigh* to rise and fall, or be sustained, like scales---and by consequence, to *carry* or *sustain*---to *weigh* a pound, is to *carry* or *sustain* a pound. Hence also we have *wag* to move one way and the other, like waves---as a man does in *waggery*. Hence the Latins had their *veho*, (pronounced *wego*, gutturally)---to carry---with all its derivatives---*ad-veho*, *conveho*, *inveho*, &c. And let it be remembered that *weight* and *wectum*, are the same word---*wectum* being pronounced by the Romans *wectum* or *wegtum*. *Weight* is

the participle of *weigh*, and signifies *carried, sustained*—that is, what is sustained in scales. *Waggon*, a carrier, is from the same root. Let it be observed, however, that our ancestors did not receive the word from the Romans. On the contrary, the Romans received the word from the north; and it is a material point of history which I can prove to demonstration, that the great body of Greeks and Romans were descendants from the Scythians or Teutones, who colonized their respective countries, before the era of profane history.

“*Wed*,” says Johnson, “*wedian*, Saxon,” and there he leaves us in obscurity; for he evidently knew not the meaning of the word.

*Wed* is from a common root with the Latin *vador* [*wa-dor*] and the original idea is to *pledge, engage, &c.* *Wed*, therefore, *ex vi termini*, contains in it the solemn contract, or mutual pledge of fidelity, which is the essence of marriage; an idea that never entered the heads of our lexicographers.

These examples will show what etymology *is*, in the books now published, and what I intend it *shall be* in my proposed work. I can affirm that nearly one half of what is called etymology in Vossius, Junius, Skinner, Johnson and Ainsworth, consists of groundless conjectures, or in statements that throw not a ray of light on the subject.

The errors of Johnson’s Dictionary have been the subject of much complaint in Great Britain. Mason, in the preface to his supplement observes, that “of all publications, not one can be mentioned, where scrupulous exactness should be more peculiarly observed, than in a Dictionary. Yet Johnson’s *abounds with inaccuracies as much as any English book whatever, written by a scholar.*” Johnson himself acknowledges this in the advertisement to the fourth edition, where he says, “I have left that *inaccurate* which never was made *exact*, and that *imperfect* which never was *completed*.” Indeed! had it been made *exact* and *completed*, how could it be left *inaccurate* and *incomplete*?

Mason observes that Johnson often mistook the meaning of passages which he produced as examples, and that “this muddiness of intellect sadly besmears and defaces *almost every page*.” Several methods have been proposed in England to remedy the evil.—the Rev. Herbert Crofts proposed to write a new Dictionary; but

Mason supposed it better to let Johnson's work remain unmolested, and add a supplement to rectify his errors and supply his defects.

I can assure these gentlemen and the American public that the errors in Johnson's Dictionary are *ten times* as numerous as they suppose; and that the confidence now reposed in its accuracy, is the *greatest injury to philology* that now exists. I can assure them further that if any man, whatever may be his abilities in other respects, should attempt to compile a new Dictionary, or amend Johnson's, without a profound knowledge of etymology, he will unquestionably do as much harm as good.

If this representation of the imperfections of Johnson's Dictionary is just, it may be asked, what are the excellencies in the work to which it owes its reputation? To this inquiry the answer is obvious: Dr. Johnson has given many definitions of words which his predecessors had omitted, and added illustrations which, in many instances, are very valuable. These real improvements could not fail to be duly appreciated; while the display of erudition in numerous extracts from English writers, concurring with the reputation which the author derived from his other writings, have led the public to repose an undue confidence in his opinions.—This is probably the sense in which we are to understand Mr. H. Tooke, in the passage cited, in which he declares that the portion of merit which the Dictionary possesses, renders it the more dangerous. Indeed, in any branch of literature, nothing is so dangerous as the errors of a great man.

But the great advances in Philology which have been made in Europe, within the last twenty years, enable us to disabuse ourselves of these prepossessions. And I am firmly persuaded that, whatever prejudices my fellow citizens now entertain, they will be satisfied, at a period not very remote, that this subject is far better understood now, than it was in the age of Dr. Johnson.

With regard to any aid from patronage, to enable me the more speedily to execute my contemplated work, I am not very solicitous. I have published my design, and my wishes; with some slight expectation that a small number of my fellow citizens would rejoice in the opportunity of lending their countenance to so important an undertaking. A few gentlemen of literary distinction have duly appreciated the merit of the design; but the general spirit manifested in the *large towns* gives me little room to expect any aid from my fellow citizens. I therefore rely alone upon my own resources, and am not without a belief that I shall be able, with these alone, to accomplish my design. If I should succeed, my opposers will certainly regret their premature expressions of disapprobation. I ask no favors: the undertaking is Herculean, but it is of far less consequence to *me* than to *my country*.

It is however a melancholy consideration that the minds of a great part of our citizens are not only fettered, but actually humbled by a servile reverence of European authorities. They look to Europe for opinions, as for fashions; and whether they are right or wrong, expedient or inexpedient, are questions that seldom oc-

cupy a thought. This respect for foreign opinions is now the most formidable barrier to any advances in critical knowledge; nor can we have scholars of deep erudition on this subject, till our citizens lay aside their modern English books, and push their researches into antiquity.

It is impossible to improve in knowledge, while we take it for granted the books we have cannot be improved. While this pernicious error governs public opinion in this country, the mind is enslaved—it is chained down to a limited range of inquiry—the intellectual powers cease to be exerted in search of truth. “*Studium cum spe senescit.*” This delusion is the insidious Delilah by which the Sampsons of our country are shorn of their locks. In running over the gross and palpable errors which spread themselves over every page of what are considered as standard books, I hardly know which sentiment predominates in my mind—regret at the low state of philological learning, or indignation at the efforts made to check every attempt to improve it.

But I must put an end to these remarks, for a volume would not contain the truths that I might unfold on this subject. Let me only add, what I am prepared, by a minute examination of this subject, to affirm, that not a single page of Johnson’s Dictionary is correct—every page requires amendment, or admits of material improvement. This remark, with some abatement, is true also of the Greek and Latin Dictionaries now used in our seminaries of learning.

Our Grammars are equally defective and erroneous. Most of the principles of construction in our language are established, so as to admit of no controversy. But of the *doubtful points*, which a critical knowledge of the history of our language is required to adjust, not half of them have been correctly settled by Lowth and his followers; and I have no hesitation in affirming, that the grammars now taught in our schools, *introduce more errors than they correct.* Neither Lowth nor Johnson understood the Saxon or Primitive English, without which no man can compile a real English Grammar.

The discoveries of Mr. H. Tooke, as Darwin has remarked, unfold, at a single flash, the true theory of language which had lain, for ages, buried beneath the learned lumber of the schools. That author, however, has left the investigation incomplete. I shall pursue it with zeal—and undoubtedly with success.

Accept my respects,

N. WEBSTER.

NEW-HAVEN, OCT. 1307.





Z270 W382L 1007 c.1



